

Sermon: The Holy Name

The Rev. Mike Wernick

January 1, 2017

Year A

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalm 8

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 2:15-21

I was born without a name... I was supposed to be born in December... was supposed to be a Sagittarius baby... but I was born in October... and am a Libra... I was supposed to come home from the hospital... like most babies do... with a name... but because I was born two months early... because I weighed less than four pounds... instead of... let's say... almost seven pounds... for reasons that probably had more to do with my mom's biochemistry... but that may have had something to do with the stars... because my parents were caught off guard by my arrival and had not finalized... had not agreed on a name... because of some unknown circumstances... I came home from Brooklyn Jewish Hospital with a document... that said Boy Wernick... it didn't take too long though for my parents to decide on Michael... my father's... mother's... brother's name... my great uncle... Michael Sternbach... I even have a sterling silver tie tack that belonged to him...

It's by our names that others know who we are... in Jewish tradition... I am *Michael ben Eliezer*... Michael the son of Eli... ben Eli is like an adjective... it describes which Michael I am... but even if we added a dozen... or two dozen... or three dozen adjectives to my name... we still wouldn't capture the fullness of who I am...

Names are powerful... in our creation story... the first Adam... the first earth creature... called each animal... and whatever the man called them... that became its name... and names help us communicate... with just one word... we can identify which animal we mean... instead of using many descriptive words to paint a word picture which describes the animal... tall... yellowish... spots... long neck... gentle... eats leaves... or I could just say giraffe... the name doesn't tell us which giraffe... but it identifies a category...

I've learned... that in East Indian thought... perhaps in a mystical way... there is a relationship between the name of something and the thing it describes... the thing itself... springs from the name it is given... and the name is a spontaneous expression of the thing represented... and also in Jewish thought... a name is not merely an arbitrary designation... a random combination of sounds... a name conveys the nature and essence of the thing named... it represents the history and reputation of the being named... this is not as strange as it may seem... in English... we often refer to a person's reputation as his "good name..."

When a company is sold... one thing that may also be sold... is the company's "good will..." that is... the right to use the company's name... and the Hebrew concept of a name is very similar to these ideas...

An example of this occurs in Exodus 3... Moses asks God what God's "name" is... but Moses is not asking "what should I call you..." Moses is asking... "who are you... what are you like... what have you done..." This is clear from God's response... God replies that He is eternal... that He is the God of our ancestors... that He has seen our affliction and will redeem us from bondage...

Another example of this... is found in the concepts of *chillul Ha-Shem*... and *kiddush Ha-Shem*...

An act that causes God... or Judaism... to come into disrespect... or a commandment to be disobeyed... is often referred to as *chillul Ha-Shem*... This is not about harming a mere word... but harming one's reputation... one's good name...

Similarly... any act which increases the respect accorded to God... or Judaism... is referred to as *kiddush Ha-Shem*... sanctifying the Name...

Because a name represents the reputation of the thing named... a name should be treated with the same respect as the thing's reputation... for this reason... God's Names... in all of their forms... *El Echad... El Shaddai... El Elyon... El Roi... El Haggadol...* all their forms are treated with great respect and reverence in Judaism...

And I experienced this... as I was growing up... God's name... commonly appears in scripture... as Y... H... W... H... and even without vowels one can say Yahweh... but I encountered many from synagogue... and many relatives... who... even when they would write the word God... would write G - hyphen - d... and they would not speak G-d's name... because even with tens... or hundreds of thousands of adjectives... we could never... in a single word... hope to contain the totality of who God is... so it is better to avoid it entirely... it is better to avoid selling God short...

Today's commemoration is called The Holy Name... today we lift up the solemnity... the *kiddush Ha-Shem...* of Jesus' name... at whose name every knee shall bow... but we gain some additional insight into Jesus... by also lifting up another name... the name of Jesus' mother... Mary...

A systematic theology professor would go into this much more deeply... but basically... Mary is sometimes referred to as *Christotokos...* the mother of Christ... and sometimes referred to as *Theotokos...* the mother of God... in our theology... in our creeds... we say we understand that Jesus is fully human... and fully divine... which is confusing... and when we try to reconcile these two realities... we tend to reject ambiguity... mystery... uncertainty... and try with our heads to name these two realities... with a single word... but when we do... we commit *chillul Ha-Shem...*

As John Shea put it... there was concern... about whether the two natures... human and divine... were totally separate... or simply distinct... was Mary the mother of a human being in whom the Eternal Word dwelled... or was she the mother of the Eternal Word which united itself to a human nature...

If we see these natures as totally separate... then when Jesus was tired or weeping... the human nature was at work... but when He was walking on water or healing the sick... the divine nature was at work... and those who understand Jesus this way would call Mary... *Christotokos*...

If we see these natures as simply distinct... as Shea wrote... then there is a stronger sense of union... but the divine nature sometimes overshadowed the human nature... and it made people wonder whether the human nature had any real significance... for example... he wrote... how could Jesus fast for forty days and not be physically affected... how could he be beaten so severely... and not succumb to the full effect of the pain... and those who understood Jesus this way would call Mary... *Theotokos*... And I think we can promote *kiddush Ha-Shem*... by understanding that both of these names for Mary... are valid ways of thinking about how the human and the divine come together in Jesus... and if the pivotal event is the Incarnation... if the game changer is that God came as one of us... then it is precisely the human nature of Jesus that expresses his divine nature... and if we carry the divine spark within us... then that spark inextricably ties us too... back to God...

We celebrate The Holy Name today... on January 1... on New Year's Day... we bid farewell to the past year embodied by the Grim Reaper... and welcome the new year embodied by the sashed baby... full of possibility and promise... last evening there were parties... there was the magic of mysterious anticipation... of the stroke of midnight... last evening and today are a time when many people... the world over... make new year's resolutions... a commitment to some kind of renewal... you know... eat less... exercise more... and there is a certain degree of social expectation that we play along... perhaps people on FaceBook have already asked what your resolutions are...

But underneath the revelry... underneath what is contrived... underneath the hotel dinner parties... and today's football games... there is real possibility for change... our

lives need continual renewal... we have not yet become... all that God has called us to be... and deep down... we want to be known... we yearn to be known... not only by a word... not only by a few dozen adjectives... like priest... pastor... preacher... son... brother... uncle... father... husband... friend... but by who we are... by what we are like... by what we have done...

On this day... the new baby... full of promise... wrapped not in a sash... but in bands of cloth... is circumcised... and enters the covenant that God made with Israel... and Joseph and Mary name him Jesus... following the divine plan of which they are a part... on this day... we begin a new year... we may make some resolutions... we may commit to changing some behaviors... we may give those things a name... but what we really want to change... is who we are... what we are like... and what we will do... to enhance our reputations... we enact *kiddush Ha-Shem*... we sanctify our names... and our reputations... the Good News... is that God became human so that we might become more divine... let us choose wisely... so that the divine spark within us... burns more brightly...

Merry Christmas... and a Brightly Burning New Year!

Mike+